MORAL INTEGRITY? ATTICUS FINCH AND THE CARDINAL VIRTUES

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Abstract

Fifty years after its publication, *To Kill a Mockingbird* remains widely popular despite serious criticism of its moral limitations. In particular, Atticus Finch’s suitability as a role model has come into question. Nevertheless, for many Atticus is an attractive and inspirational figure. Examining Atticus’s narrative through virtue ethics provides a more nuanced understanding of his character that assists with discerning his adequacy as an exemplar. As he negotiates conflicting claims of justice, fidelity, and self-care, Atticus is at times a prudent person who demonstrates moral coherence in his relationships, though in significant ways he also fails to act with full integrity.

I. INTRODUCTION

The year 2010 marked the fiftieth anniversary of *To Kill a Mockingbird*’s publication, and Harper Lee’s novel remains immensely popular and broadly read.¹ Yet questions have arisen about the novel’s moral stance within its own historical context, as well as the wisdom of its continued use within classrooms and as a source of moral inspiration. These critiques are serious, and examine the depths to which racism, paternalism, classism, and sexism inform the novel’s presuppositions and potential messages.²

More particularly, the character of Atticus Finch, held up in much commentary and popular imagination as heroic in the face of racial injustice, has come into question.³ If Atticus is not a figure worthy of imitation, then taking him as an exemplar points to a dangerous lack of discernment with regard to Atticus’s shortcomings in his own context, which may transfer to blindness to such issues as racism within the reader’s own context. And yet, despite these critiques, many people are drawn to Atticus. If their inspiration is not misguided, then they are responding to something worthy of imitation in Atticus’s moral vision and agency.⁴ Examining Atticus through the lens of

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Virtue ethics yields a more nuanced appropriation of his character and points to the enduring moral relevance of the novel even as it reveals the need for further moral growth, both in Atticus and in ourselves.

II. VIRTUE ETHICS

James Keenan’s construction of the cardinal virtues provides a lens for interpreting and evaluating Atticus as moral actor: ‘The cardinal virtues are based on modest claims. They do not purport to offer a picture of the ideal person nor to exhaust the entire domain of virtue. Rather than being the last word on virtue, they are among the first, providing the bare essentials for right human living and specific action.’ Central to Keenan’s argument is the insight that people are essentially relational. With Scout as the narrator, the very structure of Lee’s story makes relationality key to Atticus’s character. Keenan reconfigures the traditional list of cardinal virtues to reflect the divergent, legitimate goods of three types of relationships: general, specific, and unique. We are ordered to these relationships by three cardinal virtues which are not ‘ethically prior’ to one another: justice, fidelity, and self-care.

Justice disposes us to be in relationship generally with all persons in a manner that recognizes equality and acts for fairness. This virtue demands that the welfare and rights of others be upheld, and that others be recognized as our neighbors whether they live next door or across the world. The virtue of fidelity, however, recognizes that we are to act in a particular way towards the people to whom we are particularly joined. Contrary to being on par with all others, fidelity requires that we prize the cares and concerns of these persons above those of others to whom we are not similarly bonded. Keenan’s examples include familial and sacramental bonds, though we could doubtlessly envision a spectrum of relationships that might fall under fidelity, such as those between business partners, a student and teacher or a religious community. Finally, Keenan proposes the virtue of self-care, which reflects the moral agent’s unique relationship to him- or herself. Self-care upholds one’s responsibility for one’s own spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional well-being.

Prudence, the fourth cardinal virtue, aims at mediating the diverse goods sought by the other three. First, prudence helps us to identify correctly the demands of self-care, fidelity, and justice. Thus, it strives to achieve the aims of the other three virtues. Second, since through the practice of these virtues we become more just, more faithful, and more caring of our selves, prudence ‘is clearly a virtue that pursues ends and effectively establishes the moral agenda for the person growing in these virtues’. Prudence attends to our moral growth in the present with an eye to our future growth and telos. Finally, since the ends of virtue are related to each other, prudence helps us to
integrate their claims, assisting ‘each virtue to shape its end as more inclusive of
the other two’. Prudence assists practical decision-making through the
evaluation of possible consequences. To a certain extent prudence is necessary
in order to avoid danger. This does not mean, however, that the end of
prudence is necessarily to keep us ‘safe’. Rather, prudence helps us choose
the right risk in light of our capacity for virtue and with regard to the claims of
justice, fidelity, and self-care within a particular situation. For example, pru-
dence may renegotiate self-care’s claims in order to take a stand on a political
issue or to care for a sick child.

Prudence may be further described through David Norton’s construal of
integrity as bringing together the ‘separable and initially disordered aspects of
the self–faculties, desires, interests, roles—such that they complement rather
than contradict one another, and each contributes to the realization of the
chosen good’. To be a person of moral integrity means more than acting
consistently with regard to any one virtue; moral integrity is diminished if the
agent acts in accord with justice, fidelity or self-care alone. Rather, the moral
integrity displayed through prudence renders actions coherent in light of all
one’s relationships. Narrative is necessary in order to discern between mere
consistency, on one hand, and coherence, on the other. Through narrative we
may come to see the moral agent in light of the virtue of his or her relation-
ships, and thus be better able to adduce moral integrity.

III. ATTICUS’S FIDELITY, JUSTICE, AND SELF-CARE

This section considers three questions in order to examine how Atticus pro-
gresses and fails in coherent integration of the cardinal virtues. First, what
constitutes fidelity, justice, and self-care for Atticus? Second, how do these
virtues come into conflict? Third, does the narrative describe Atticus as mor-
ally integrated or as morally incoherent in resolving the claims of these virtues?

A. Fidelity

Through Scout we experience Atticus as a loving father. It is into his lap that
she climbs at the end of long days; he has insight into the children’s emotional
and mental states; he plays and reads with Jem and Scout, and they race to
meet him on his way home from work. Atticus is an affectionate and firm
parent. His authority is built upon his children’s trust rather than corporal
reinforcement; conversely, neither Jem nor Scout wish to compromise
Atticus’s trust in them. Throughout the novel he is quite present to the
children, and conscientiously promotes their moral development. Both
before and after the trial, Atticus shows concern for how his children
handle the stress of the situation. He especially does not want them to
Atticus is a single parent, raising his children at a distance from his own siblings, Jack and Alexandra. His fidelity extends to his brother and sister, though he comes into conflict with Alexandra over the trial and Scout’s dress and manners. He also has a different notion of family loyalty than does Alexandra. The latter construes family in terms of lineage, while Atticus looks more to the individuals who make up the family. Thus, much to Alexandra’s dismay, he is candid with Jem and Scout about the ‘skeletons’ in the Finch family closet, even while teaching the children to respect their relatives. Included in Atticus’s circle of fidelity is Calpurnia, the family’s African American housekeeper. He defends Calpurnia against Scout’s complaints about her discipline, as well as against Alexandra’s attempt to displace her. Instead, Atticus claims Calpurnia as an important member of the family. He recognizes that the family is dependent upon her in order to function each day, and also believes that she provides a firm moral foundation for the children.

B. Justice

Atticus treats all persons with respect and courtesy regardless of their social standing or attitudes toward him. Further, he has a deep sense of how economic classes and race relations in his community are inter-related. One of the few times Atticus is described as having strong emotion is when he tells the children that those who cheat African Americans are despicable.

As a lawyer, Atticus’s character is tied intimately to justice. When the children complain to their neighbor, Miss Maudie, that Atticus cannot do anything, she replies that Atticus can make a will ‘so airtight can’t anybody meddle with it’. More importantly, however, she describes the community as trusting Atticus to take the right course of action on its behalf: ‘Whether Maycomb knows it or not, we’re paying him the highest tribute we can pay to a man. We trust him to do right. It’s that simple.’ Nevertheless, Atticus is not a strict constructionist when it comes to the legal code of Alabama: a community may decide to overlook its laws in order to benefit the vulnerable. For example, Atticus tells Scout the white community turns a blind eye to Bob Ewell’s poaching, since he has children who would otherwise go hungry; likewise, no serious attempt is made to keep the Ewell children in school. Such ‘loopholes’ are inconsistent with Atticus’s relationship to the law, though whether they are also morally incoherent with regard to the integration of justice must be discerned.
Atticus is a conscientious member of the state legislature, though he cannot be described as a civil rights crusader, or as an idealist. He does not choose to defend Tom Robinson, but is appointed, and admits reluctance. It is clear from the narrative that he does not enjoy criminal law, and it may be inferred from the text that, with the exception of Tom’s case, Atticus did not take an active part in advocating for social justice or changes to systems of injustice. Nevertheless, he recognizes that in this particular time and place he has a role to play in attempting to secure justice.

C. Self-care

Atticus’s self-care is more elliptical than explicit in the novel. However, Harper Lee does offer us glimpses into Atticus’s mental, spiritual, and physical health. For example, after dinner each night Atticus’s habit is to read the newspaper. As the children grow older they decide it is ‘generous to allow Atticus thirty minutes to himself after supper’. Even prior to this gift from the children, however, Atticus’s reading was a balance between spending time with the children and engaging in intellectual stimulation. Scout learned to read while sitting on his lap, not from a children’s book, but rather from the newspaper. Scout also indicates that reading the newspaper seems to be her father’s way of reasoning through his decisions: ‘I sometimes think Atticus subjected every crisis of his life to tranquil evaluation behind The Mobile Register, The Birmingham News, and The Montgomery Advertiser.’

Lee offers other hints of Atticus’s self-care throughout the novel. The Finch family attends church regularly, but Atticus sits in a separate pew from the children. Such behavior may seem curious, but one can construe the opportunity to worship with undivided attention as a form of self-care. Atticus clearly has a sense of humour, alternatively gentle and dry; when Mayella’s father spits in his face, Atticus laconically comments: ‘I wish Bob Ewell wouldn’t chew tobacco.’ Atticus walks to his office rather than driving, and his working hours are regular, generally not overflowing into evenings with the family. Though Jem wishes he would play football, Atticus acknowledges his own age, and does not try to be heroically athletic.

More telling with regard to his character, despite his keen aim with a rifle, Atticus refrains from hunting and the children have no idea of his skill. When Jem and Scout wonder at his lack of disclosure, Miss Maudie enlightens them: ‘Marksmanship’s a gift of God, a talent…. I think maybe he put his gun down when he realized that God had given him an unfair advantage over most living things.’ Maudie’s interpretation points to Atticus’s justice, but also to a strong self-identity that does not require dominance in order to be affirmed. Atticus’s restraint suggests a capacity for honest self-reflection and discipline, which may also connote the virtue of self-care.
The demands of justice disrupt self-care and fidelity in the novel, though the competing claims of these three virtues raise the need to reconcile self-care with fidelity as well.

A. Justice and Fidelity

Justice and fidelity are primary areas of conflict for Atticus. First, his family members do not fully support his decision to represent Tom. Alexandra is not uncaring, but has concern for how her brother’s actions reflect on the family; and her grandson clearly has heard Atticus referred to in a derogatory manner. Jem reports his aunt ‘won’t let [Atticus] alone about Tom Robinson. She almost said Atticus was disgracin’ the family’.36

Second, though Atticus is aware that Jem and Scout will be taunted about his defense of Tom, he forbids them to physically fight other children over the matter. Atticus says to Scout, ‘...you just hold your head high and keep those fists down... Try fighting with your head for a change... it’s a good one, even if it does resist learning’.38 More trying than their peers, however, are the adults who denigrate Atticus in front of the children, forcing them into an even more difficult position. Not only is their father’s reputation being sullied, but as children Jem and Scout are unable to defend him without the danger of breaching the respect they are taught to show their elders. Atticus anticipates that Scout will have the most difficulty following his injunctions, and is surprised when Jem is the one to take out his frustration on Mrs Dubose’s prize camellias following the elderly woman’s attack on Atticus’s character.39

Later in novel Scout finds her wit of aid in reconciling difficult encounters with adults. Miss Stephanie Crawford, the neighborhood gossip, teases Scout by making allusion to Scout’s presence at the Robinson trial: ‘Why shoot, I thought you wanted to be a lawyer, you’ve already commenced going to court.’ Under Miss Maudie’s influence, Scout calmly responds: ‘Nome, just a lady.’40

Third, due to the salacious nature of the alleged crime, Scout and Jem are exposed at a young age to the realities of rape and family violence. Atticus believes in answering Scout’s questions truthfully, but gives a rather arid description of rape as ‘carnal knowledge of a female by force and without consent’, which for all its honesty may still be confusingly incomplete.41 Against Atticus’s wishes, Jem, Dill, and Scout sneak in to the trial. Though Jem insists that Scout does not understand the subject matter, it is through her eyes that we come to understand Mayella Ewell’s dismal life, her attempted seduction of Tom, and her treatment at the hands of her alcoholic and sexually abusive father.42
Finally, Atticus is not unaware that responding to the claims of justice will make the children’s lives more difficult mentally and emotionally. He seriously underestimates, however, the degree to which his response will put them in harm’s way. This happens at least twice, first when Scout, Dill, and Jem find themselves in the middle of a lynch mob, and second at the hands of a vengeful Bob Ewell. For instance, when Scout leaps into the circle of men surrounding her father outside the jail she indicates, ‘I thought he would have a fine surprise, but his face killed my joy. A flash of plain fear was going out of his eyes, but returned when Dill and Jem wriggled into the light.’

B. Justice and Self-care

Jem and Scout are aware of potential physical harm to their father because of his representation of Tom Robinson. On the mental and emotional level, we hear through Alexandra and Jem that the trial is worrying Atticus. Jem tells Scout, ‘It’s this Tom Robinson case that’s worryin’ [Atticus] to death’, and Alexandra says to Maudie, ‘It tears him to pieces. He doesn’t show it much, but it tears him to pieces. I’ve seen him when—what else do they want from him, Maudie, what else?’ The stress of the entire situation occasionally affects Atticus’s own sense of centre. For example, when Alexandra comes to live with the family she insists that Atticus instill a sense of familial heritage in the children. Despite being uncomfortable with teaching the children a lesson contrary to his beliefs about human equality, Atticus acquiesces, but then speaks sharply to Scout, who dissolves into tears because Atticus is acting so unlike himself:

There was nowhere to go, but I turned to go and met Atticus’s vest front. I buried my head in it... ‘Your stomach’s growling,’ I said. ‘I know it,’ he said. ‘You better take some soda.’ ‘I will,’ he said. ‘Atticus, is all this behavin’ an stuff gonna make things different? I mean are you—?’ I felt his hand on the back of my head. ‘Don’t you worry about anything,’ he said. ‘It’s not time to worry.’ When I heard that, I knew he had come back to us. The blood in my legs began to flow again, and I raised my head. ‘You really want us to do all that? I can’t remember everything Finches are supposed to do...’ ‘I don’t want you to remember it. Forget it.’

Self-care and justice come into conflict more evidently when Atticus is called to act in extraordinary ways to ensure justice. Atticus’s self-care does not incline him to be affected personally by the pursuit of justice to the extreme
necessitated by the Robinson trial. Though he recognizes the personal call of justice as inevitable given his profession, he does not seek it out: ‘Scout, simply by the nature of the work, every lawyer gets at least one case in his lifetime that affects him personally. This one’s mine, I guess.’

After its conclusion, the repercussions of the trial continue to affect Atticus. By the novel’s end Scout indicates ‘His age was beginning to show, his one sign of inner turmoil: the strong line of his jaw melted a little, one became aware of telltale creases forming under his ears, one noticed not his jet-black hair but the gray patches growing at his temples.’ Bob Ewell’s attack on the children shakes Atticus out of his usual ability to reason clearly. Sheriff Tate remarks, ‘You’ve been under a strain tonight no man should ever have to go through. Why you ain’t in the bed from it I don’t know, but I do know that for once you haven’t been able to put two and two together ...’ In the end, the novel gives no hint that Atticus’s attitude towards justice undergoes material change following the trial, or that he is more inclined to allow the claims of justice to challenge his self-care deeply.

V. MORAL INTEGRITY OR INCOHERENCE?

Atticus seems to recognize the need for prudence in order to mediate and integrate the conflicting claims of these virtues in a coherent manner. As Andrew Flescher notes, ‘Morally speaking there is not “down time” or private space into which the virtuously minded agent may retreat. Our character development is a project that permeates every aspect of our life.’ Atticus’s embodiment of that principle is evidenced by his refusal to create an artificial barrier between his public and his personal life. In a conversation with Miss Maudie about Boo Radley, Scout asks,

‘You reckon he’s crazy?’

Miss Maudie shook her head. ‘If he’s not he should be by now. The things that happen to people we never really know. What happens in houses behind closed doors, what secrets—’

‘Atticus don’t ever do anything to Jem and me in the house that he don’t do in the yard,’ I said, feeling it my duty to defend my parent.

‘Gracious child, I was raveling a thread, wasn’t even thinking about your father, but now that I am I’ll say this: Atticus Finch is the same in his house as he is on the public streets ...’

Miss Maudie is not indicating that Atticus’s sense of justice is so developed that he treats a stranger in the same manner as he would his children; nor that his fidelity is so diffuse that he shows acquaintances the same affection as he would Scout; nor that his sense of self-care excuses him from his responsibilities.
Rather, Atticus seems to have some claim to the virtue of prudence, or moral integrity, because he does not have a separate ethic for his public and private life. To some extent, prudence has integrated the ends of justice (a public claim) with the ends of fidelity and self-care (communal and personal claims).  

Atticus’s integration does not free justice, fidelity, and self-care from tension; rather, the key insight into Atticus’s character is that these virtues are interrelated with regard to his moral agency. Scout asks Atticus:

‘If you shouldn’t be defendin’ [Tom Robinson], then why are you doin’ it?’ ‘For a number of reasons,’ said Atticus. ‘The main one is, if I didn’t I couldn’t hold up my head in town, I couldn’t represent this county in the legislature, I couldn’t even tell you and Jem not to do something again.’

Later when Scout questions him again, he responds:

‘Scout… it’s not fair to you and Jem, I know that, but sometimes we have to make the best of things, and the way we conduct ourselves when the chips are down—well, all I can say is, when you and Jem are grown, maybe you’ll look back on this with some compassion and some feeling that I didn’t let you down. This case, Tom Robinson’s case, is something that goes to the essence of a man’s conscience—Scout, I couldn’t go to church and worship God if I didn’t try to help that man…. before I can live with other folks I’ve got to live with myself. The one thing that doesn’t abide by majority rule is a person’s conscience.’

Thus we see that for Atticus, the interrelation of the virtues is of key importance for reconciling their conflicting claims. If Atticus does not uphold his responsibilities with regard to justice, he believes that his moral authority both as a public servant and as a father will be compromised irreparably. Similarly, to ignore the injustice being done to Tom Robinson would be an abnegation of Atticus’s relationship with God as well as with himself.

VI. PRUDENCE IN PROGRESS: INTEGRATING THE VIRTUES

A. Integrating Justice with Fidelity

Atticus’s tactic for integrating justice with fidelity is revealed in his determination to teach his children how to address the conflict successfully. Jem and Scout learn about justice in a particular context because of Tom Robinson’s trial. Yet, Atticus can use this situation as a teaching moment only because of the strong bonds of fidelity within their family. While Atticus cannot deny the claims of justice, nor the inequalities of the world, he is faithful as a parent by not simply sheltering the children from truth. Instead he uses his knowledge of
their strengths and weaknesses to teach them how to be just themselves, while trusting that their fidelity to him will allow him to guide them through difficult situations.

Atticus encourages Jem and Scout to use empathy to mediate the claims of justice and fidelity, and the novel resounds with the theme of this lesson. Chapter Two opens with Scout’s eagerly anticipated first day of school. The morning is filled by unfortunate misunderstandings with Miss Caroline, a first time teacher and Maycomb newcomer, who is shocked when she discovers that Scout is already able to read and write. Their relationship further declines when Scout’s well-intentioned explanation of a classmate’s poverty is mistaken for cruelty. Atticus’s own lesson for Scout is played out many times throughout the novel: the necessity of empathy. When Scout complains of Miss Caroline, Atticus replies ‘...if you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you’ll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.’ Aided by empathy, Atticus looks through the eyes of others who place claims of virtue upon him. Atticus’s advice to step into someone else’s shoes is repeated several times, climaxing when Scout stands on the Radley porch after escorting Boo back home—she physically sees her life from the perspective of another. ‘Atticus was right. One time he said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them. Just standing on the Radley porch was enough.’

Though Miss Caroline represents the first wave of pedagogical techniques based in John Dewey’s philosophy of experiential learning, the children truly learn by listening to, watching, and imitating Atticus, as well as other adults. When Miss Caroline orders her to stop reading, Scout reflects

I never deliberately learned to read... I could not remember when the lines above Atticus’s moving finger separated into words, but I had stared at them all the evenings in my memory, listening to the news of the day, Bills To Be Enacted Into Laws, the diaries of Lorenzo Dow—anything Atticus happened to be reading when I crawled into his lap every night.

Similarly, Scout and Jem never deliberately learn to grow in virtue; rather, they learn how to be virtuous by living with Atticus.

This integration is most fully seen at the novel’s conclusion. Atticus is initially concerned that Sheriff Tate is sheltering Jem from the charge of killing Bob Ewell; even when it becomes clear the sheriff’s concern is to protect reclusive Boo Radley from the community’s overwhelming solicitude, Atticus remains reluctant to abandon his instinct for transparency. Atticus’s ultimate commitment is not to an abstract principle of jurisprudence, however, but
rather to the coherence between his public and private life, between justice and fidelity:

‘Before Jem looks at anyone else he looks at me, and I’ve tried to live so I can look squarely back at him... if I connived at something like this, frankly I couldn’t meet his eye, and the day I can’t do that I’ll know I’ve lost him. I don’t want to lose him and Scout, because they’re all I’ve got... I can’t live one way in town and another way in my home.’

Atticus’s anxiety on this point is only assuaged when Scout shows that through empathy she sees the moral coherence of the sheriff’s argument and Atticus’s acquiescence to it; to do otherwise would be ‘sort of like shootin’ a mockingbird, wouldn’t it?’ She not only grasps the pain public adulation would cause Boo Radley, but can also reassure her father of her continued trust in his moral coherence.

B. Integrating Justice and Self-care

Lee’s novel does not give an extensive depiction of how the claims of justice and self-care are resolved. The brevity of reference to self-care is perhaps only natural since we hear the story from Scout’s limited, though precocious, perspective. Atticus’s tension is depicted by a departure from his usual phlegmatic response to Alexandra; in his loosening of his vest and necktie before the court; in his vehemence against whites who cheat African Americans, and his fatalistic remark that it ‘seems only children weep’ over injustice. He is deeply emotionally affected by the gratitude of some African American members of the community. The morning after the trial the kitchen table is loaded with gifts of food. Calpurnia asks: ‘They—they aren’t oversteppin’ themselves, are they?’ Atticus’s eyes filled with tears. He did not speak for a moment. “Tell them I’m very grateful,” he said. “Tell them—tell them they must never do this again. Times are too hard...” He left the kitchen, went to the diningroom and excused himself to Aunt Alexandra, put on his hat and went to town. Atticus does seem to rely on his sense of humor to counter these tensions, and seems prepared to allow himself time to rest following the trial. If justice were to overwhelm self-care we could expect the results to be manifested more evidently in Atticus’s words and behaviour.

VII. PRUDENCE INTERRUPTED: MORAL INCOHERENCE

Atticus does not always integrate the claims of self-care, justice, and fidelity in a prudent manner. Ironically, as two examples show, his empathy for others becomes a blind spot with regard to these virtues. First, when Atticus hears of the possibility of a mob breaking in to the county jail and lynching Tom, he
goes alone to guard the door. Scout, Jem, and Dill follow him, and it is the combination of Jem’s defiant refusal to leave his father in the midst of these men and Scout’s innocent attempt to engage the father of her classmate in conversation that leads to the diffusion of the situation. Second, when Bob Ewell threatens Atticus following the trial, Atticus’s response is dismissive, rather than concerned; he seems to have no fear that Ewell will take revenge upon either himself or his children.

In both cases, Atticus assumes his empathy provides enough insight into others’ motivations and intent for accurate assessment of any threat to his or the children’s safety. Though he is empathetic to others and has insight into their motivations and character, his own virtues do not allow him to be fully empathetic with the darker sides of human nature. When Atticus admits that he cannot fathom ‘[w]hy reasonable people go stark raving mad when anything involving a Negro comes up’, he is saying in essence that there are people with whom he cannot be completely empathetic. Further, he does not realize that empathy cannot completely grasp another’s intentions. For instance, when Jem fears that a member of the lynch mob might have killed his father, Atticus only acknowledges that the mob might have ‘hurt me a little’, thus dismissing Jem’s greater fear. Jem is later concerned about Bob Ewell:

‘When a man says he’s going to get you, looks like he means it.’ ‘He meant it when he said it,’ said Atticus. ‘Jem, see if you can stand in Bob Ewell’s shoes a minute. I destroyed his last shred of credibility at that trial, if he had any to begin with. The man had to have some kind of comeback, his kind always does. So if spitting in my face and threatening me saved Mayella Ewell one extra beating, that’s something I’ll gladly take. He had to take it out on somebody and I’d rather have it be me than that houseful of children out there.’

Interestingly, it is Alexandra who has the better insight into Bob Ewell’s intentions:

‘His kind will do anything to pay off a grudge.’
‘What on earth could Ewell do to me, sister?’
‘Something furtive . . . You may count on that.’

Alexandra is right: months later Bob Ewell attacks the children as they walk home, intending not just to scare, but to kill them. Thus Atticus’s own sense of justice and inability to imagine what others are capable of can be detrimental when not mediated by the claims of self-care and fidelity. While Atticus cannot be expected to be omniscient, it seems clear that he has acted in an imprudent, or incoherent, manner with regard both to fidelity and to self-care.
Conversely, at times, Atticus’s self-care is overly reductive of his ability to seek justice, even in cases when seeking justice is of benefit to those who have claims upon Atticus’s fidelity. The novel describes two incidents in which Atticus is confronted with the need to make a decision related to justice. In the first, Atticus receives a frantic call from Calpurnia about a ‘mad dog’ on their street. He arrives home with Sheriff Tate, who initially appears to have the role of dealing with the dangerous animal. Yet, the sheriff urges Atticus to take the lead:

‘Take him, Mr. Finch.’ Mr. Tate handed the rifle to Atticus; Jem and I nearly fainted.
‘Don’t waste time, Heck,’ said Atticus. ‘Go on.’
‘Mr. Finch, this is a one-shot job.’
Atticus shook his head vehemently: ‘Don’t just stand there, Heck! He won’t wait all day for you—’
‘For God’s sake, Mr. Finch, look where he is! Miss and you’ll go straight through the Radley house! I can’t shoot that well and you know it!’
‘I haven’t shot a gun in thirty years—’
Mr. Tate almost threw the rifle at Atticus. ‘I’d feel mighty comfortable if you did now,’ he said.

Two virtues call upon Atticus to act in this scene. From the standpoint of fidelity, the dog threatens his family and immediate neighbors; from the perspective of justice, the animal poses a danger to the broader community if it continues towards downtown Maycomb. This scene may be interpreted by linking the mad dog with racism, which harms the very community that produces it. Scout makes this interpretative link when her memory of Atticus facing the mob before the county jail is overlain by the image of Atticus shooting the dog. Virtue ethics does not dispute that interpretation, but rather highlights Atticus’s ability to kill the dog cleanly and swiftly, and thus to remove the danger the dog represents. While hunting for pleasure does not fit in with his notion of self-care, this situation is not a matter of personal preference: fidelity and justice require a new mediation of self-care. Nevertheless, the sheriff must plead with Atticus to move beyond self-care in order to address the threat.

Similarly, criminal law is repugnant to Atticus; his self-care leads him to practice other types of law: ‘His first two clients were the last two persons hanged in the Maycomb County jail . . . an occasion that was probably the beginning of my father’s profound distaste for the practices of criminal law.’ Atticus is clearly aware of the danger Mayella Ewell’s charge poses to Tom Robinson, as well as the menace racism presents to all in Maycomb, a community about which he cares deeply and to which he is quite committed.

Both fidelity and justice call him to action. Yet, despite his personal sensibilities
and professional competence, Atticus does not volunteer for Tom Robinson’s defence; instead, he is appointed. Speaking to his brother, Atticus says, ‘You know, I’d hoped to get through life without a case of this kind, but John Taylor pointed at me and said, “You’re it.”’ As in the situation with the mad dog, Atticus must be pushed out of his self-care in order to address the claims of fidelity and justice. Once an external force compels him, Atticus responds with diligence and excellence. Nevertheless, the fact that he must be propelled into action implies that his ability to mediate the claims of self-care and justice is underdeveloped, and may also reduce his faithfulness in other relationships.

VIII. LEARNING FROM ATTICUS

The preceding examination of To Kill a Mockingbird’s narrative through virtue ethics depicts Atticus as a figure of both moral integrity and moral incoherence. In many instances, he displays a strong capacity for prudence that allows him to mediate the claims of justice, self-care, and fidelity. Nevertheless, at times he displays moral incoherence when one of the cardinal virtues overwhelms the claims of the others, and inhibits virtuous habits or actions. Therefore his function as a role model must be carefully discerned, and idealization avoided, lest we indiscriminately pattern ourselves on his weaknesses as well as his strengths. In that light, it is necessary to inquire what can be learned from Atticus with particular regard to our own responses to justice, fidelity, and self-care and the relationships these virtues engender. While the answer to that question is necessarily quite personal depending upon the sensibilities and context of the reader, two lessons present themselves for consideration.

First, Aristotle wrote ‘We may grasp the nature of prudence if we consider what sort of people we call prudent’: prudence is learned through observing and being in relationship with prudent persons. Certainly as Jem and Scout grow and mature they learn prudence as well as the other virtues from their father. However, it is important to note our need for others who can point us towards the prudent person. Miss Maudie plays this role in a primary way for Scout, Jem, and even Alexandra. Just as prudence cannot be learned in a vacuum, neither can the prudent person be recognized without others’ aid.

Further, Atticus unintentionally teaches that prudence itself necessitates relationship. Atticus often appears morally sui generis in the novel; the history of his own path to prudence is unclear. Norton notes that ‘Saints, like heroes have histories’, yet Atticus’s moral history is absent. More worrisome, however, is that he seems to deliberate on important decisions by himself. Marie Failinger notes, ‘the reality is that as we find [Atticus] making his most important decisions—about representing Tom Robinson, going to the jail to protect Tom, and examining the Ewells at trial, for instance—Atticus is truly alone.’ Lack of counsel affects Atticus’s capacity to act justly, faithfully, and
with self-care because it impacts his ability to discern his actions’ repercussions: moral integrity is a process necessitating the involvement of others. Through Judge Taylor and Sheriff Tate, Atticus is called into just action against the inclinations of his self-care, and thus others may be necessary in order for us to heed a virtue’s claim upon us. Conversely, while Alexandra is not an example of a prudent person, she better comprehends Bob Ewell’s intentions towards Atticus, an insight that might have made Atticus more vigilant with regard to his family’s safety. Listening carefully to others, whatever their perceived level of virtue, is necessary as insight into human behaviour and problem solving are not necessarily functions of a person’s own moral integrity.

Second, Atticus hopes the time the jury took to deliberate its verdict is a ‘shadow of a beginning’ towards equal justice for African Americans. Atticus himself represents only the beginning of a more coherent approach to justice that involves not only the recognition of civil rights, but also their active pursuit in collaborative solidarity with the oppressed. Through his example, however, Jem and Scout may learn to go further in their own commitments to justice. Eric Sundquist notes that Jem and Scout, children in the 1930s, would be adults by the time of the 1950s civil rights movement. What they learned from Atticus may help them to view such momentous decisions as Brown v. Board of Education quite differently than do some of their peers.

The children’s changing insights and behaviours, particularly around the importance of empathy, are evidence that Atticus’s lessons meet with some success. Jem is deeply affected by the injustice done to Tom Robinson. Nevertheless, he absorbs Atticus’s lesson of the need to reason through the issues underlying injustice. Scout struggles throughout the novel with Maycomb’s social classes, trying to discern what separates ‘fine folks’ from ‘trash’. At core, her question is why Alexandra forbids her from forming closer relationships with Calpurnia and impoverished whites. Though influenced by her community’s tendency to classify families by character groups, Scout eventually sees that empathy can move her beyond stereotypes to change her relationships with other people. Through empathy, her sense of justice is united to fidelity such that ‘the other’ is drawn into her circle of concern.

When Jem proposes his own categorization of people based on their ancestors’ literacy, Scout counters him:

‘No, everybody’s gotta learn, nobody’s born knowin’. . . . Naw, Jem, I think there’s just one kind of folks. Folks.’

Jem responds:

‘If there’s just one kind of folks, why can’t they get along with each other? If they’re all alike, why do they go out of their way to despise each other?’
The children’s insights are complementary. As a result of his empathy for Tom Robinson, Jem struggles with unjust social structures. He learns the injustice done to another places a claim of justice upon him. Similarly, Scout recognizes the injustice of defining people based on race, class or family. Scout’s empathy for others opens new possibilities for fidelity with people her aunt defines as being outside their family’s circle of concern.91

Formed by their father’s virtue, the children’s own vision of justice may also exceed his. Thus the novel offers a second lesson: the virtues do not only orient us to diverse relationships, but are also means by which we impact those with whom we are in relationship. Virtue extends beyond the individual and into the communal; the relatively small conversions of one person are not necessarily solipsistic, but may contribute to others’ moral growth and transformation. In the midst of our own narratives it is therefore necessary to reflect upon the virtues we learn and teach through our relationships.

REFERENCES


2 Examples of these critiques may be found in Candice Mancini (ed.), Racism in Harper Lee’s ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’ (Farmington Hills, MI: Greenhaven Press, 2008).

3 For example: ‘Throughout his relatively comfortable and pleasant life in Maycomb, Atticus Finch knows about the grinding, ever-present humiliation and degradation of the black people of Maycomb; he tolerates it; and sometimes he even trivializes and condones it.’ Monroe H. Freedman, ‘Atticus Finch—Right and Wrong’ in Racism in Harper Lee’s ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’, p. 73. See also, Steven Lubet, ‘Reconstructing Atticus Finch’, Michigan Law Review (1999) 1339–1362. Lubet considers whether Atticus is truly heroic if Mayella Ewell’s accusation of rape is in fact true.

4 Andrew Flescher, Heroes, Saints and Ordinary Morality (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2003), p. 172. For some readers, Atticus may fit with Flescher’s description of a hero, rather than a saint, due to his imitability. ‘Heroes are not merely moral paragons, but exemplars, demonstrations of human beings living the best kind of moral life. They are not pictures of perfection. While they stand out among us, the life to which they have habituated themselves is in principle accessible to anyone who becomes sufficiently virtuous. Thus, they stand worthy of our admiration and our emulation.’


6 Ibid., pp. 718, 719.

7 Ibid., pp. 718, 723.

8 Ibid., p. 724.

9 Ibid., p. 725.
Our relationships, of course, may not divide neatly into persons to whom we owe justice versus persons to whom we owe fidelity. Scout comes into conflict with her Aunt Alexandra over whether the edges of fidelity and justice may be porous.

Keenan, p. 726.

Ibid., p. 727.

Ibid., p. 728.

Ibid.


Ibid., pp. 63, 100.

Ibid., pp. 85, 128.

T.L. Shaffer, ‘The Moral Theology of Atticus Finch’, *University of Pittsburgh Law Review* 421 (1981) 195. When Atticus fears that covering up Boo Radley’s role in saving Jem and Scout will cause him to lose Jem’s trust, Atticus ‘felt that the issue was whether he would, in some real way, cease to exist for his son if he lied to protect him’. ‘It is important to the understanding of Atticus Finch to see that he was able to tell the truth about his community but still remain fond of his community.’ Ibid., p. 186.

Lee, pp. 151–3.

Ibid., p. 28; pp. 155–6.

Ibid., p. 253. ‘As you grow older, you’ll see white men cheat black men every day of your life, but let me tell you something and don’t you forget it—whenever a white man does that to a black man, no matter who he is, how rich he is, or how fine a family he comes from, that white man is trash.... There’s nothing more sickening to me than a low-grade white man who’ll take advantage of a Negro’s ignorance. Don’t fool yourselves—it’s all adding up and one of these days we’re going to pay the bill for it.’ Lee, p. 104.

Ibid., pp. 270–1.

Ibid., p. 34. See also, Norton, p. 187. Norton notes that ‘One consequence of directing morality to the preservation of social order is that morality becomes very difficult to distinguish from law; moral requirements are framed as rules, moral rules serve the same basic purpose as civil and criminal statutes and moral judgments are modeled on judicial decisions in terms of impartiality and impersonality. Impartiality and impersonality mean that rightly made moral judgments will be made identically by whomever is called upon to judge, and will be applied identically to different persons in relevantly similar circumstances.’ In contrast, Atticus’s interest is not in maintaining the status quo; he recognizes a difference between morality and the law; and he understands that context matters in judgment.

Tim Dare describes Atticus’s foregoing of the claims of justice as signs that his is in fact a tragic, rather than an heroic, character. He sees this particularly in Atticus’s decision to follow Sheriff Heck Tate’s insistence that Bob Ewell fell on his knife rather than being killed by Boo Radley; however, Dare reaches that conclusion by abstracting Atticus from all other relationships and considering Atticus only in light of his obligations to justice as a lawyer. Tim Dare, ‘Virtue, Ethics and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 19 (2007) 81–100.

Those who have the experience of attending religious services with young children may find this a particularly plausible demonstration of self-care.

Sundquist, p. 196.

Lee, pp. 209, 222. Bob Ewell’s alcoholism is referenced throughout the novel, but Mayella’s sexual abuse at the hands of her father comes to us through Tom Robinson’s testimony: ‘She says she never kissed a grown man before…. She says what her papa do to her don’t count.’

Lee, pp. 173; 301–2.

Lee, p. 51. This description of Atticus is repeated with variations at two other points in the novel. Scout recalls it when speaking to Dill, and transposes to the courtroom: ‘He’s the same in the courtroom as he is on the public streets’. Lee, p. 227. Atticus describes himself in a similar fashion: ‘I can’t live one way in town and another way in my home’, Lee, p. 315.

Stanley Hauerwas, A Community of Character (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), pp. 9–10. ‘The loss of narrative as a central category for social ethics has resulted in a failure to see that the ways the issues of social ethics are identified—i.e., the relation of personal and social ethics, the meaning and status of the individual in relation to the community, freedom versus equality, the interrelation of love and justice—are more a reflection of a political philosophy than they are crucial categories for the analysis of a community’s social ethic.’ Hauerwas’s claim may be nuanced in favor of indicating that, at least in regard to the ‘relation of personal and social ethics’, the narrative not only forms the possibility of union between private and public ethics, but that such a union influences the narrative as well. In other words, whilst the narrative may be prior to us, we must nevertheless interpret the narrative—and integration between public and private morality is essential to that interpretation.

Lee, p. 86.
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59 Lee, p. 19.
60 *Ibid.*., p. 33.
62 Edgar H. Schuster, ‘Discovering Theme and Structure in the Novel’, *The English Journal* LII (1963) 507–8. ‘It is not Dewey’s approach that is being criticized, then, but its implementation. The learn by doing approach, Miss Lee implies, is dependent upon the teacher… Scout makes her final ironic comment on classroom education in the last chapter. She is in the third grade when she says, “…I thought Jem and I would get grown but there wasn’t much else left for us to learn, except possibly algebra.”’

64 *Ibid.*, pp. 282, 284. By comparison, Scout’s school teachers can be sources of moral confusion for her. Miss Gates literally spells out what prejudice means with regard to Hitler’s persecution of the Jews; but clearly has her own prejudices against blacks: ‘I heard her say it’s time somebody taught ‘em a lesson, they were getting’ way above themselves, an’ the next thing they think they can do is marry us.’

65 Lee, p. 315.

71 Lee, pp. 100–1.
75 Anon., Being Atticus Finch: ‘The Professional Role of Empathy in To Kill a Mockingbird’, *Harvard Law Review* Vol. 117 (March 2004): 1687. The article argues that Atticus is incapable of true empathy with Bob Ewell; further, ‘…Atticus’s attitude smacks of willful blindness and patronizing pity.’

77 ‘We lived on the main residential street in town….’ Lee, p. 7. ‘…the business section of Maycomb drew us frequently up the street past the real property of Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose. It was impossible to go to town without passing her house unless we wished to walk a mile out of the way.’ Lee, p. 114.


79 Lee, p. 5.
80 ‘[Atticus] liked Maycomb, he was Maycomb County born and bred; he knew his people, they knew him, and because of Simon Finch’s industry, Atticus was related by blood or marriage to nearly every family in town.’ Lee, p. 5. This supports a reading of Atticus as having claims of both justice and fidelity in relation to Maycomb.

81 Lee, p. 100.

83 Lee, pp. 50–1; 246–7; 270–1.
84 Norton, p. 179.
85 Failinger, pp. 307, 308. Failinger believes the primary argument of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is that integrity is maintained alone, rather than through friendship. This seems an overstatement but does highlight that Atticus’s individualism—whether intended or not—is problematic.

86 Lee, p. 254.
87 Sundquist, pp. 180–209.
89 Lee, pp. 256–8. Alexandra tells Scout that she cannot invite Walter Cunningham to the house ‘Because—he—is—trash, that’s why you can’t play with him. I’ll not have you around him, picking up his habits and learning Lord-knows-what.
You’re enough of a problem to your father as it is.’ Jem leads Scout away crying, but she later tells him ‘It was her callin’ Walter Cunningham trash that got me goin’, Jem, not what she said about me being a problem to Atticus. We got that all straight one time, I asked if I was a problem and he said not much of one, at most one that he could always figure out, and not to worry my head a second about botherin’ him. Naw, it was Walter—that boy’s not trash, Jem. He ain’t like the Ewells.’

90 Lee, p. 260.
91 Ibid., pp. 256–7. Scout’s movement towards fidelity begins quite naturally with Calpurnia and a desire to ‘be her “company,”’ to see how she lived, who her friends were’ and extends to fostering a friendship with Walter Cunningham. Alexandra is firmly against any relationship beyond the demands of basic civility.